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ABSTRACT

A study attempting to disclose dilemmas encountered by university professors as a means of better understanding their inner world is discussed. The nature of these dilemmas is investigated via the thinking aloud technique. Twelve subjects were asked to think aloud about dilemmas they encountered in their work, and the flow of thoughts was protocolled verbatim and subjected to content analysis. The topics of dilemmas were divided into three categories, in descending order of frequency: knowledge (old and new, academic interests, general liberal education and professional education, quality and equality, specialization and integration, disciplines, and teaching); computers (old and new and fear of neglect of values and ideology); and research (quantitative and qualitative research methods and research addiction). All of these dilemmas entailed a time element. The rapid growth of knowledge that characterizes this era generated several needs which in turn brought forth the dilemmas mentioned. Differences among faculties as well as individual differences emerged. Out of the 12 personal profiles, two disclosed some salient and idiosyncratic characteristics. The distribution of dilemmas among faculties shows members of the social sciences faculty seem to encounter a larger range of dilemmas as compared to their colleagues in the other faculties. New technologies and accumulation of knowledge do not affect the humanities as much as other areas. Contains 18 references. (Author/SM)

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To be or to desist - Dilemmas encountered by University Professors

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To be or to desist - Dilemmas encountered by University Professors

Abstract

The study presents an attempt to disclose dilemmas encountered by university professors as a means of better understanding their inner world. Twelve university professors were interviewed in-depth regarding this issue. The content analysis of verbatim protocols of the interviews yielded several topics of dilemmas: **KNOWLEDGE**: including academic interests, liberal vs. professional education; specialization and interpretation, **COMPUTERS** including old vs. new paradigms, fear of neglect of values. **RESEARCH**, including qualitative vs. quantitative paradigms, "research addiction". All of these dilemmas entailed a time element. In addition, differences among faculties as well as individual differences emerged. Several conclusions are put forward.

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TO BE OR TO DESIST - DILEMMAS ENCOUNTERED BY UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

Perspective

The area of higher education as a field of research is relatively new. An extensive review of the literature on higher education shows that research studies conducted in this field began in the early fifties (Trent & Cohen, 1973). The main studies mentioned relate to student characteristics, teaching methods and technology, evaluation of teaching and organizational aspects. Other studies reviewed in a more recent study relate to comparative research, curriculum, planning and administration, faculty development (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1985) and on departmental heads and the problems they encounter (Kremer & Avi-Izhak, 1961).

The scarcity of studies in the area of academic administration was well described by Coladarci (1980), who having been appointed as Dean at Stanford University, reported: "I was assuming a role for which I was most unprepared, I set about to locate and study the accumulated knowledge and wisdom...I found with academic surprise that the literature addressing this honorable estate could be read comfortably between a late breakfast and an early lunch."

The topic of higher education that received the most of the research attention is faculty development, which was investigated mainly in connection with student achievement. University professors as such did not constitute the ultimate focus of research in this area. Few are the studies that touch on socio-psychological aspects of the world of university professors (Kremer & Lifman, 1977; Brahns & Thomsen, 1973; Hofman & Kremer, 1984; Avi-Izhak & Kremer, 1986). Only recently, through the phenomenon of burnout has this population attracted the interest of the research community. This interest is reflected in a series of studies on burnout in the academe (Boberg, 1982; Crosby, 1982; Gmelch, 1984; Horowitz, 1985; Perlberg, 1986). Consequently, and in view of the central role that university professors play in higher

education, it appears that the disclosure of aspects of the inner world of this population becomes a necessity. The topic selected for investigation in this realm is the dilemmas that university professors encounter in relation with their occupation.

At this point, some elaboration on the concept of dilemma is in order: dilemma - derived from Greek 'di' - two and 'lemma' - proposition denotes "an argument that presents two or more alternatives" (Webster). The connotations generated from discussions with a group of professionals conceive of dilemma as a state of conversation with oneself, hesitation and perplexity concerning practical actions or philosophical views. The present study borrows from these connotations as well as from the relevant literature (Berlak & Berlak, 1981) and relates to dilemmas in an eclectic way. Accordingly, a dilemma is an inner conversation with oneself concerning two or more alternate propositions or assumptions that may be adopted; an argument that presents an antagonist with several possible views; a choice between alternate courses of actions, contradictory imperatives that arise within the person.

The presence of dilemma is of intrinsic interest to education as the latter embraces a variety of philosophies and views that are characterized by pluralism rather than by absolutism. Furthermore, changes that occurred in the perceptions of knowledge and professions present a fertile soil for dilemma emergence (see Shon's elaboration on Technical Rationality and Reflection in Action, 1983). Higher education is no exception. It entails major dilemmas, some of which result from the aim of knowledge production and are expressed in the well known issue of "publish or perish", and some of which result from societal demands. An example of the latter resides in the growth in enrollment, that has raised and sharpened the dilemma of quality vs. equality.

These and other dilemmas concern higher education in general. The present study focuses on dilemmas encountered by university professors, as individuals. It is aimed at disclosing the content of the dilemmas they encounter. Information gained on this issue may be of intrinsic interest to the student of higher education and add to the

knowledge in this field. It also has the potential of fostering better understanding of professors' inner world, for practical purposes.

METHOD

As the intent of the study was to reveal topics of dilemmas encountered by university professors, and to investigate their nature rather than to provide specific findings to a-priori hypotheses, interpretive methods of search seemed to be appropriate (Erickson, 1986). Thus, the selected method of inquiry was the "thinking-aloud technique", employed in similar studies (Yinger & Clark, 1982). Subjects were asked to "think aloud" about dilemmas they encountered in their work. The flow of thoughts was protocolled verbatim and subjected to content-analysis (Fox, 1969). The unit of analysis was a thought unit, which could consist of one or more sentences. The topics generated by each unit were listed, counted and classified into groups of dilemmas. Next, the protocols were analyzed in an attempt to detect underlying views, attitudes and "tones" of reference (Fox, ibid.). These procedures were performed by two doctoral students trained on content-analysis. Findings were summarized after an agreement of at least 85% between the analyzers had been reached.

The study population consisted of a group of twelve university professors. Of these four were associated with the faculty of social sciences, four with the faculty of physical sciences and four with the faculty of humanities. Assuming that new faculty members tend to confine their dilemmas to tenure and as a result other topics that potentially may constitute sources of dilemmas become secondary, it was decided to concentrate on tenured professors, in order to widen the scope of the dilemma reference.

FINDINGS

The content-analysis revealed the main topics of dilemmas as well as certain faculty and personal characteristics.

A. Topics of dilemmas

The classification of dilemmas into categories yielded three main topics. These were in descending order of frequency the following: Knowledge, Computers and Research with a frequency of 33%, 25%, 25%, respectively. The remaining dilemmas could not be classified under any distinct catgegory.

Knowledge associated dilemmas

(1) *Old and new*: Some interviewees remarked that having been trained within certain frames of reference and paradigms and having been socialized into them, the thought inherent in these paradigms became second nature to them. The emergence of new paradigms that occurred in the course of the years created some ambivalence: On the one hand there is the desire to adopt innovations and to be in the frontier of the knowledge, on the other hand there is a strong connection to the paradigms already assimilated. The tensions between the old and the new created a dilemma. It appears that some social desirability as well as conformity were present in this dilemma. A psychology professor remarked: "I was trained as a behaviorist, I published many studies in this field, yet I feel now that my studies don't arouse the same interest they used to. I would like to change direction, but I can't get free of the old...".

(2) *Academic interests*: The following excerpts from a protocol illustrate another dilemma within the knowledge category, however in a somewhat different context. "I would like to have more Ph.D. students as I find them a source of inspiration and I want them to pursue my field of study. Our Ph.D. committee doesn't encourage this specific

field of inquiry. My dilemma is: Shall I make some compromise regarding my specific interests and get more students to advise or shall I rather give up my desire to work with these young people and fulfill my interests by myself?" It appears that this dilemma grows out of a certain academic policy regarding the need for knowledge production. It also reflects the power of committees in channelling these directions. Such pressure may be frustrating as it doesn't allow for individuality. It is then the power of social trends and conformity as opposed to personalism and idiosyncracy.

(3) *General - liberal education and professional education* - The rapid accumulation of knowledge and the vast amount of innovations don't leave enough "curriculum space" for liberal education. This problem is especially critical for those who enroll to the university in order to get professional education. Within the limits of a certain amount of time, it seems that the attention given to the one is at the expense of the other. This dilemma becomes even more acute in view of the pragmatic tendency on the part of students, who are interested in receiving their diplomas in the shortest time possible. It is also possible that this dilemma is more intense in the Israeli case, as the young men and women enroll to the university after 3-4 years of service in the army.

(4) *Quality and equality* - The desire to respond to both needs of quality and equality creates a dilemma concerning the student population. Elitism seems to create a paradox in a democratic society. The possible solution to accept all eligible candidates to study for the first academic degree and be more selective for the higher academic degrees, doesn't satisfy some interviewees. Attitudes ranged from one extreme - "All young people deserve higher education if they want to... you can not predict exactly who is going to succeed or fail" - to another extreme: "...we cannot afford higher education to all interested young people...it is immoral to lay such a burden on the tax payer...universities have to produce knowledge, this is their main aim..."

(5) *Specialization and integration* - The differentiation of knowledge, a general developmental phenomenon, resulting in the need to go into specifics, created for some

professors the problem of integration. They claimed that students had difficulties to integrate specifics back into broader concepts: "Should one put the emphasis in teaching on integrative ideas and concepts or rather on specifics and let the students integrate on their own?... Can they do that?"

(6) *Disciplines* - A rather interesting point of view was expressed by a professor of mathematics: "Dilemmas do not exist within the 'true disciplines'. The dilemmas pertaining to knowledge arise in the 'quasi disciplines' and paradigms that grow out of temporary needs and fads. It is necessary to distinguish between barren paradigms that are comfortable to use but are misconceived and theoretically unsound resulting in a phenomenon of researching the unresearchable and of raising wrong quations."

(7) *Teaching* - One interviewee stated: "I am at a loss between two extremes: personally I prefer heurism, improvisation and intuition over algorithm, structure and order, but somehow it appears that I need the latter. So my teaching moves from one style to another, which I'm sure creates some ambiguity and perplexity in my students. Actually, I find advantages with both styles...for me it's a dilemma".

Another 'struggle' between two possible extremes, those of teacher vs. student centered teaching was experienced and elaborated upon by two professors. The resulting dilemma concerned the advantages of both teaching styles: "Structuring and organizing the content and presenting it in a systematic way will facilitate students' efficiency in learning at the expense, however, of fostering independent study skills. If I demand indpendent learning I may achieve certain goals at the expense of others. Also, I know that while for some students one teaching style is more appropriate than the other, it may not be so for the rest of the students..."

The time devoted to research at the expense of that devoted to teaching and introducing new teaching methods presented a dilemma even to these tenured professors, whose career is not at risk.

(1) *Old and new* - the tremendous changes and innovations that occur constantly generate the main dilemmas in this field. To keep up-to-date one must become a permanent student. "This in itself is fine with someone whose field of study is computers. However, for someone whose field is difference and has to devote the time to his/her own expertise, this becomes a burden", claimed one interviewee. Another one stated his dilemma by asking: "Shall I devote some of my precious time to study new programs so as not to be dependent upon others to run my data or shall I rather devote my time to read in my own area?...

The fact that young people are to-day more literate and knowledgeable about new technologies than senior faculty members was an additional source of dilemmas.

(2) *Fear of neglect of values and ideology* - as a result of the great attention and importance attached to computer technology was expressed by some. Others feared that student-teacher communication may be harmed as "the computer has taken over the role of transmitting information, advantageous as the latter may be... computerization leads to dehumanization". Computer technology has also opened a wide range of opportunities to researchers, who plunge into them to the point of getting into unnecessary sophistication and thus missing the main ideas.

Finally, a problem mentioned as a serious one concerns the fact that the prestige attached to computer science attracts the highly intellectual students, leaving other departments with the less able ones.

(1) *The quantitative and qualitative* research methods presented the professors in the faculty of social science with a dilemma regarding which methods best suit their research questions. It appeared to some that the application of quantitative methods was to some extent a result of attendency to level up with the physical sciences, disregarding the fact that certain variables were not quantifiable. Also, the strict variable isolation led to futile results, as it did not congrue with complex realities. Disappointment with this type of research created a favorable scene for the emergence of qualitative methods and consequently aroused the dilemma of defining research questions in terms that lead to one method of research or another, and at the same time being aware of advantages and disadvantages of both.

(2) *"Research addiction"* An "intrinsic need" to do research was mentioned by most (eight) interviewees. Whether this need became a "second nature" in the course of the years, as a result of the pressure to publish, or it was a- priori built in the personal system and served as a motivating factor to pursue a university career, was considered irrelevant, "the main problem is that this need isolates me from social life and interferes with my family activities." The dilemma mentioned in this respect concerned two life styles termed by one interviewee as "normal vs. research addicted."

B. **Dilemmas in various faculties**

The analysis of the dilemma distribution among faculties yielded several differences that deserve some attention. Out of the total number of dilemmas in the realm of 'knowledge', 45% were encountered by interviewees in the faculty of social sciences, 25% and 30% by interviewees in the faculties of humanities, and physical sciences, respectively. The dilemma analysis in the realm of computers yielded 45%, 20%, 35% in the faculties of social sciences, of humanities and of physical sciences, respectively. The distribution of dilemmas related to research points to 55%, 20% and 25% in the

social sciences, humanities and physical sciences faculties, respectively. It appears that the social sciences faculty members encountered dilemmas in all three categories to a significantly larger extent as compared with the other two groups.

C. Personal profiles

As far as personal profiles are concerned two interviewees disclosed some salient and idiosyncratic characteristics: the one - a psychology professor tended to expose some of this personality characteristics and labelled himself as a"dilemma type" in all aspects of life. His dilemmas were affectively oriented, concerning values, his own and others' welfare, social outcomes, the other - an economic professor concentrated entirely on dilemmas pertaining to 'knowledge', and labelled himself as a cognitive type.

Conclusion

A meta-analysis of the dilemmas points to a TIME element. It appears that the rapid growth of knowledge that characterizes this era generated several needs which in turn brought forth the dilemmas mentioned'. The need to adapt and incorporate new technologies and innovations in one's lifetime, while abandoning the already adapted ones; the need to go into specifics without losing direction and main ideas, and the need to learn to use new technologies in teaching while continuing to publish, generated the dilemmas in the realm of 'knowledge', 'computer developments' and 'research'. One aspect of these dilemmas, inherent in the content of these topics, is their cognitive nature. Another aspect pertains to their social - ideological nature. The specification-integration and the qualitative-quantitative research methods are some illustrations of the cognitive aspect, the quality- equality, liberal, general-professional education illustrate the social aspect of dilemmas. The latter type of dilemmas are discussed in the literature more than the former, probably because the social aspects of relevant to a larger population (Gmelch, 1984, Horowitz, 1985, Kremer, 1982).

The distribution of dilemmas among faculties draws the attention to the members of the social sciences faculty, who seem to encounter a larger range of dilemmas as compared to their colleagues in the other two faculties. This finding may be explained on the ground of the nature of the disciplines of each faculty. New technologies and accumulation of knowledge do not affect the humanities as much as the other two areas. No wonder then, that members of this faculty encountered the smallest range of dilemmas. The physical sciences, in which most innovations occurred, consist of subject-matter areas considered to be "true disciplines", and hence they do not raise a large number of dilemmas. The subject-matter areas that constitute faculties of social sciences are viewed as "quasi disciplines", they borrow from philosophy as well as from biology and mathematics, and as such are in an intermediate position; sociology, psychology, social science may serve as an illustration. The largest number of dilemmas encountered by the members of this faculty may be explained by this intermediate position.

Theoretically, the investigation of dilemmas is apt to contribute to understanding of some of the inner world of faculty members and throw some light on problems of higher education. Practically, dilemmas may be viewed in a dual way: from a positive standpoint they are a source of fruitful thinking and deliberations, from a negative standpoint they may lead to frustration and consequently to burnout. Departmental discussions, clarification of dilemmas, and suggestions regarding ways of coping with them may alleviate some of the frustration.

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